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Iran indignant after Trump says military 'locked and loaded'

• US president says ready to intervene if Iran kills protesters; Tehran warns intervention will put US troops, regional stability at risk • Israel mounts online campaign urging Iranians to revolt; shares fake AI-generated videos, images

DUBAI: Donald Trump warned on Friday that the US was "locked and loaded" to respond if Iran's security forces killed protesters, prompting Tehran to caution that any intervention would destabilise the region already on edge as unrest spread across the country amid a spiralling economic crisis.

Clashes between demonstrators and security forces were reported in Iran's several cities on Thursday, with at least six people said to have been killed in the first fatalities since protests over prices and the plunging rial escalated this week.

What began with shopkeepers striking in Tehran on Sunday has since rippled to at least 15 cities, largely in the west, in the most serious challenge to Iran's clerical establishment since the nationwide protests of 2022.

In a post on his Truth Social platform, Trump issued a blunt ultimatum. "If Iran shoots and violently kills peaceful protesters, which is their custom, the United States of America will come to their rescue," he wrote. "We are locked and loaded and ready to go."

The comments drew an immediate rebuke from Iran's leadership. Supreme National Security Council head Ali Larijani warned that American involvement would threaten US forces in the Middle East.

"US interference in this internal matter would mean destabilising the entire region and destroying America's interest," Mr Larijani said in a post on the social platform *X*. "The US president "should be mindful of their soldiers' safety".

Other officials echoed the warning. Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei scoffed at Trump's offer to "rescue" protesters.

"Iranians will resolve their challenges through dialogue and mutual engagement, and will not permit any form of foreign interference," Mr Baghaei said, citing the 1988 US downing of an Iranian passenger plane as evidence of American hostility.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's adviser Ali Shamkhani said Iranian security is a "red line" and any interventionist hand would be "cut".

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the Iranian parliament speaker, wrote on *X* that if the US interferes, "all American bases and forces across the entire region will be legitimate targets".

Israel backs protesters

While Tehran lashed out at Washington, it also faced an aggressive social media campaign from Israel. Israeli government accounts and officials publicly encouraged the demonstrators, framing the unrest as the beginning of the end for the Islamic Republic.

The Mossad's official Farsi-language account posted on Monday: "Come together to the streets. It's time. We are with you — not just from afar and in words. We are with you on the ground as well."

Israel's foreign ministry posted a cartoon on *X* depicting a lion and sun — symbols of pre-revolutionary Iran — crushing the current regime's emblem. "The rise of Iranian lions and lionesses to fight against darkness," the post read. "Light triumphs over darkness."

Gila Gamliel, Israel's minister of innovation, shared a video declaring that the protests by "mothers and fathers are justified".

Diaspora Affairs Minister Amichai Chikli posted an image of a demonstrator waving the lion and sun flag, though some content shared by Israeli officials has faced scrutiny.

Several images and videos posted by Israeli accounts on social media platforms have been modified with the help of artificial intelligence tools.

One image posted by the Israel's foreign ministry on *X* confirmed to have been manipulated using AI, according to detection tools.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not publicly commented, reportedly to avoid giving Tehran an excuse to blame the unrest on "Zionist" meddling. —Agencies

TEHRAN: Women walk next to an anti-US mural on a street. Protests have erupted across the country, triggered by the collapse of Iran's currency and economic woes.—Reuters

'Conflict in India-held Kashmir remains unresolved and volatile'

• Mirwaiz Umar Farooq says 'enforced silence' hides widening trust deficit; urges renewed dialogue • Hurriyat leader calls for 'humanity' after being denied access to Srinagar's Jama Masjid • Says locals facing 'existential crisis' amid fears of demographic changes

JAMMU: In a hard-hitting statement posted on social media on the first Friday of the year, the chief cleric of India-held Kashmir, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, said that despite unilateral changes made in 2019, the reality is that the conflict continues to keep the region in a state of uncertainty that can erupt at any time.

Mirwaiz, who said he was not allowed to go to the Jama Masjid in Indian-occupied Srinagar to deliver the Friday sermon, wrote: "That is why wars are paused, not ended, and dialogue finds no takers."

"Yet beyond these incidents, in which Kashmiris find themselves at the receiving end of suspicion and attacks in parts of India, not much has changed for them. The trust deficit between them and New Delhi has widened, not shrunk. Enforced silence is projected as acquiescence. Wounds remain open, problems unaddressed, and an elected government of a Union Territory complains of being powerless," he said.

"A sense of hopelessness prevails, along with an existential crisis of losing one's identity through demographic change since the state was downgraded to a Union Territory, constitutional guarantees withdrawn, and rules and laws tweaked."

Highlighting his inherited role as a channel of lasting peace, brotherhood and reconciliation for his people and the region, Mirwaiz said: "In the past, I have engaged with leadership across the subcontinent and successive Indian governments — including former prime ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, as well as L.K. Advani — in sincere efforts at dialogue. My path remains the same."

MIRWAIZ Umar Farooq

"Is real peace possible? Yes. Kashmiris are natural optimists. Dialogue has worked elsewhere, and our hope remains alive. When there is sincere willingness to engage in the spirit of 'Insaniyat' and 'Jamhooriyat', as Vajpayee ji once said, peace gets the best chance," he wrote.

"As another year begins and we look ahead, painful memories of 2025 stay with us. It was a year marked by tragedy and uncertainty. The horrific Pahalgam attack shook us deeply. Unequivocally condemned by all in the Valley, it led to widespread anxiety as people were targeted and homes demolished. This was followed by another India–Pakistan war, a stark reminder of how fragile peace in the region continues to be.

"Today, we are operating in an environment where any expression of views contrary to the state, or any disagreement, is increasingly criminalised, branded as 'anti-national', and penalised," Mirwaiz remarked.

"No public space is available to us, and mediums of communication, including most local media, are not ready to provide any platform for expressing people's demands or views. I do not have the privilege of addressing press conferences. I cannot move without official clearance, and people cannot meet me without permission. My access to the pulpit of Jama Masjid — the spiritual heart of Kashmir — is also curtailed. Even last Friday, I was placed under house arrest, and again this Friday too.

"With Hurriyat constituents banned, all offices sealed and institutions closed, leaders and activists either in jail or under constant surveillance, social media remains the only platform that offers some space to connect with people and the outside world," he added. —The New Statesman / ANN

Pakistan reaffirms support for 'One-China principle'

Dawn Report

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan on Friday reiterated that it regarded Taiwan as an inalienable part of China.

"Pakistan and China are iron-clad friends and all-weather strategic cooperative partners. We reiterate our consistent support to China on all matters of its core interests, including Taiwan," Foreign Office spokesperson Tahir Andrabi said in reply to media queries about Pakistan's response to "developments in the Taiwan Strait".

"We will continue to adhere to the One-China principle and regard Taiwan as an inalienable part of China," he said in a statement. The FO spokesperson had made similar remarks during Thursday's press briefing in response to a question regarding the sale of arms to Taiwan by the United States.

China claims Taiwan as its own territory, while the latter rejects the former's claims.

Although the FO statement issued on Friday did not make a specific mention of the exact developments it was referring to, it comes after China completed military drills around Taiwan that included live-fire exercises aimed at simulating a blockade of key ports and assaults on maritime targets.

"The reunification of our motherland, a trend of the times, is unstoppable," Chinese President Xi Jinping said in his New Year message from Beijing. A spokesperson for Peoples Liberation Army said it had "successfully completed" the drills, code-named "Justice Mission 2025".

The US State Department had on Thursday said the Chinese war games around Taiwan "unnecessarily" spiked tensions in the region, calling on Beijing to "cease its military pressure".

"China's military activities and rhetoric towards Taiwan and others in the region increase tensions unnecessarily. We urge Beijing to exercise restraint, cease its military pressure against Taiwan, and instead engage in meaningful dialogue," State Department spokesman Tommy Pigott said in a statement.

Mamdani's letter to jailed student leader Umar Khalid riles BJP

• Party warns NYC mayor against 'interfering' in New Delhi's internal affairs • Stays silent on US lawmakers' letter pushing for bail, fair trial for incarcerated activist

By Our Correspondent

NEW DELHI: The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Friday accused New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani of "interfering" in India's internal affairs by writing a note to jailed student leader Umar Khalid, asserting that New Delhi will not tolerate any such effort.

However, the BJP remained mum on a *The Hindu* report, which stated that eight US lawmakers have written to Indian Ambassador Vinay Mohan Kwatra, urging India to grant bail and a free and fair trial to Mr Khalid "in accordance with international law".

Questioning Mr Mamdani's locus standi to comment on India's internal matters, BJP national spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia cautioned the New York City mayor against such efforts.

"If India's sovereignty is challenged, 140 crore Indians will stand united under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership," he asserted.

Mr Bhatia added that the people of India had "complete faith" in the country's judiciary.

'Words on bitterness'

The reaction came after Mr Mamdani wrote a note to Mr Khalid, recalling his words on "bitterness" and the importance of not letting it consume oneself.

The note was posted on *X* by Mr Khalid's partner, Banojyotsna Lahiri.

"When prisons try to isolate, words travel. Zohran Mamdani writes to Umar Khalid," the caption accompanying the note stated.

"Dear Umar, I think of your words on bitterness often, and the importance of not letting it consume oneself. It was a pleasure to meet your parents. We are all thinking of you," the handwritten note, signed by Mr Mamdani, read.

Reacting sharply, Mr Bhatia said: "If anybody comes out in support of any accused and interferes in India's internal matters, the country will not tolerate it."

"Who is this outsider to raise questions on our democracy and judiciary, coming in support of a person who wants to break India? This is not fair," *The Hindu* quoted him as saying at a press conference at the BJP headquarters in New Delhi.

He was apparently asked to comment on Mr Mamdani's note.

Mr Khalid and a few others have been booked under the draconian anti-terror law, Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967, and provisions of the Indian Penal Code, for allegedly being "masterminds" of the February 2020 northeast Delhi riots, which left 53 people dead and more than 700 injured.

Securing bail under the UAPA is difficult for those booked under this law as the burden to show that the case is false lies on them.

US lawmakers

In their letter dated Dec 30, according to *The Hindu*, the US lawmakers pledged support to the jailed student activist and asked the Indian government to "share the steps being taken to ensure that the judicial proceedings against Umar Khalid and those of his co-accused who remain in detention comport with international standards".

The letter by the US lawmakers was shared by Democratic Congressman Jim McGovern, who is also the co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. The others who had signed on it include Democrat Jamie Raskin, Indian-origin Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, US Representatives Jan Schakowsky, Lloyd Dogget, Rashida Talib, and Senators Chris Van Hollen, and Peter Welch.

As per the letter, Mr McGovern and others had met Umar Khalid's parents earlier in December. "Representative Raskin and I are leading our colleagues to urge that he be granted bail and a fair, timely trial in accordance with international law," he said, sharing the signed letter in a post on *X*.

The lawmakers claimed that human rights organisations, legal experts and global media have raised questions about the fairness of the investigation and legal process related to Mr Khalid's detention.

Grok AI being used to 'digitally remove women's clothing'

Chatbot blames safeguard 'lapses' for child minimal clothing images

A WOMAN has told the *BBC* she felt "dehumanised and reduced into a sexual stereotype" after Grok was used to digitally remove her clothing.

The *BBC* has seen several examples on the social media platform X of people asking the chatbot to undress women to make them appear in bikinis without their consent, as well as putting them in sexual situations.

XAI, the company behind Grok, did not respond to a request for comment, other than with an automatically-generated reply stating "legacy media lies".

Samantha Smith shared a post on X about her image being altered, which was met with comments from those who had experienced the same - before others asked Grok to generate more of her.

"While it wasn't me that was in states of undress, it looked like me and it felt like me and it felt as violating as if someone had actually posted a nude or a bikini picture of me," she said.

The regulator Ofcom said tech firms must "assess the risk" of people in the UK viewing illegal content on their platforms, but did not confirm whether it was currently investigating X or Grok in relation to AI images.

The proliferation of AI image-generating platforms since the launch of ChatGPT in 2022 has raised concerns over content manipulation and online safety across the board. It's also contributed to an increasing number of platforms that have produced deepfake nudes of actual people.

In a related development, Grok on Friday blamed said on Friday lapses in safeguards had resulted in "images depicting minors in minimal clothing" on social media platform X and that improvements were being made to prevent this.

Screenshots shared by users on X showed Grok's public media tab filled with images that users said had been altered when they uploaded photos and prompted the bot to alter them. "There are isolated cases where users prompted for and received AI images depicting minors in minimal clothing," Grok said in a post on X.

"xAI has safeguards, but improvements are ongoing to block such requests entirely." "As noted, we've identified lapses in safeguards and are urgently fixing them CSAM is illegal and prohibited," Grok said, referring to Child Sexual Abuse Material.— Monitoring Desk

China's BYD overtakes Tesla as world's top EV seller

Monitoring Desk

CHINESE carmaker BYD has overtaken Elon Musk's Tesla as the world's biggest seller of electric vehicles (EVs), marking the first time it has outpaced its American rival in annual sales, *BBC News* reported.

Tesla car sales dropped by nearly 9pc in 2025 to 1.64 million vehicles sold worldwide, the carmaker said on Friday — its second consecutive year of falling car deliveries.

Those figures placed Tesla behind BYD, which said on Thursday that sales of its battery-powered cars rose last year by almost 28pc to more than 2.25 million.

The US firm has faced a tough year with a mixed reception to new offerings, unease over Musk's political activities and intensifying competition from Chinese rivals.

According to the *BBC*, Tesla's car sales fell 16pc during the last three months of 2025. The drop was partly due to the repeal of a government subsidy that had helped knock as much as $7,500 (£5,570) off the price of certain battery electric, plug-in hybrid or fuel cell vehicles.

Wall Street analysts have recently lowered their Tesla sales estimates for 2026, signalling an increasingly gloomy outlook.

Chinese firms such as Geely, MG, and BYD — now the country's largest electric car company — have put pressure on Western rivals by pricing their vehicles below established brands.

DESPITE BYD's rise, its sales growth slowed in 2025, in part due to fierce competition in China.—AFP/file

In October, Tesla responded by launching lower-priced versions of its two best selling models in the US in a bid to boost sales.

Musk, who is already the world's richest man, is tasked with significantly boosting Tesla's sales and stock market value over the next decade to secure a record-breaking pay package. The deal, which was approved by shareholders in November, could see him getting a payout of as much as $1tn (£740bn).

As part of the agreement, Musk also has to sell a million humanoid robots over the next ten years. Tesla has invested heavily in its "Optimus" product and self-driving "Robotaxis".

Analysts say Tesla's robotaxi and self-driving rollout in 2026, which has helped send its share price to a record high, will be crucial to its overall performance.

Though there are big questions surrounding Tesla self-driving ambitions, some remain optimistic. Dan Ives from Wedbush Securities says Tesla will own about 70pc of the self-driving market over the next decade "as no other company in the world can match the scale and scope" of the firm.

Besides Tesla, Musk's business interests also include the social media platform X, the rocket firm SpaceX and the Boring Company, which digs tunnels.

Those commitments, along with running US President Donald Trump's Department of Government Efficiency (Doge) early last year, led some investors to suggest that Musk was not focusing enough on Tesla.

Musk has since stepped back from his role in the US government.

Despite BYD's rise in recent years, its sales growth slowed in 2025 to the weakest rate in five years, in part due to fierce competition in China, its key market.

And despite BYD surpassing Tesla when it comes to car sales, the US firm has remained more profitable in recent quarters.

Still, BYD remains a global EV powerhouse as its prices often undercut rival carmakers.

The Shenzhen-based company's rapid expansion - especially in Latin America, South East Asia and parts of Europe - comes despite many countries imposing steep tariffs on Chinese EVs.

In October, BYD said the UK had become its biggest market outside China.

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